

Q2
2021

THE STATE OF THE OCCUPATION

**DOCUMENTING RIGHTS ABUSES IN THE TURKISH
OCCUPIED REGIONS OF NORTH AND EAST SYRIA**



**ROJAVA
INFORMATION
CENTER**

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OCCUPIED AFRIN

SULTAN MURAD DIVISION, JAYSH AL-NUKHBA, RAJUL AL-HARB

AHRAR AL-SHAM

AHRAR AL-SHARQIYA

FAYLAQ AL-SHAM

FAYLAQ AL-RAHMAN

HAMZA DIVISION

AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA

JAYSH AL-ISLAM

SULTAN MEHMED FATIH

13TH DIVISION

SULEIMAN SHAH BRIGADE

SULTAN MURAD DIVISION

SUQOUR AL-SHAM

JAYSH AL-NUKHBA

FAYLAQ AL-MAJD (ZINKI)

TURKISH CONTROL

HAMZA BASE

SNA MILITARY POLICE HQ

SULTAN MURAD BASE

FAYLAQ AL-SHAM BASE

TURKISH BASE

MILITARY CROSSING

TURKMEN
FACTIONS

1 PRISON (MAYDAN IKBIS)

2 PRISON (RAJU)

3 'BLACK' PRISON

4 AHRAR AL SHAM PRISON (QATMAH)

5 HAMZA DIVISION PRISON (BASSOUTA)

6 HAMZA DIVISION PRISON (BASSOUTA)

7 MIT PRISON (BARAD)

8 SULEIMAN SHAH PRISON (SHIYE)

SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES

GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA

TURKISH ARMY AND

TURKISH-BACKED GROUPS

HTS-EXTREMIST GROUPS

HTS-EXTREMIST GROUPS

HTS-EXTREMIST GROUPS

HTS-EXTREMIST GROUPS

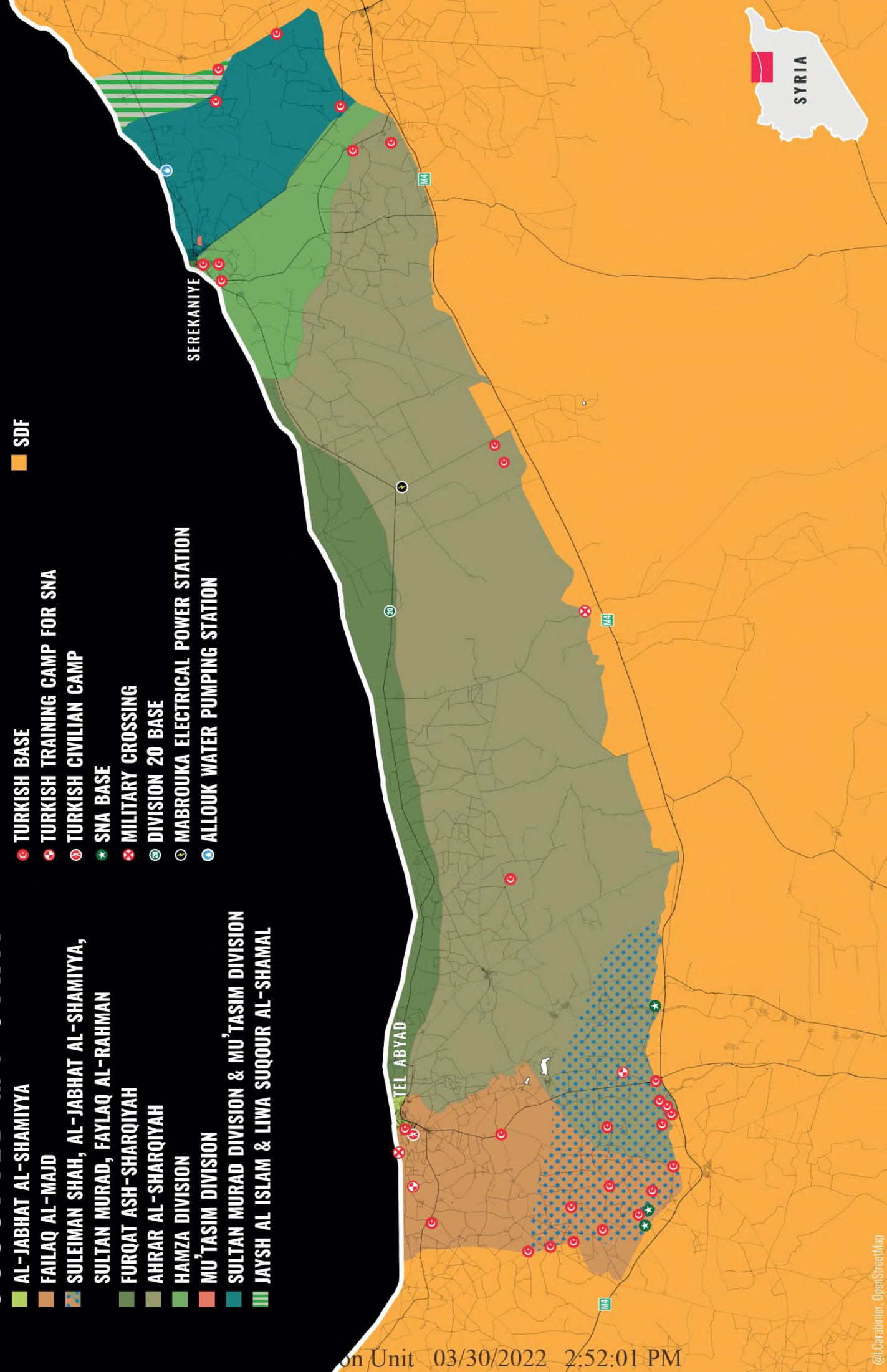


OCCUPIED M4 STRIP

- AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA
- FAILAQ AL-MAJD
- SULEIMAN SHAH, AL-JABHAT AL-SHAMIYYA, SULTAN MURAD, FAYLAQ AL-RAHMAN
- FURQAT ASH-SHARQIYAH
- AHRAR AL-SHARQIYAH
- HAMZA DIVISION
- MU'TASIM DIVISION
- SULTAN MURAD DIVISION & MU'TASIM DIVISION
- JAYSH AL ISLAM & LIWA SUQUOR AL-SHAMAL

- TURKISH BASE
- TURKISH TRAINING CAMP FOR SNA
- TURKISH CIVILIAN CAMP
- SNA BASE
- MILITARY CROSSING
- DIVISION 20 BASE
- MABROUKA ELECTRICAL POWER STATION
- ALLOUK WATER PUMPING STATION

SDF



INTRODUCTION & METHODS

INTRODUCTION

We present the second quarterly report from Rojava Information Center (RIC) focused on human rights violations in the Turkish-occupied areas of North and East Syria (NES). The report focuses on Afrin, occupied since 2018, and what RIC has termed the M4 Strip (the 5000 km² territory north of the M4 highway occupied in 2019, including the cities of Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad).

While Turkey claims it invaded these regions in order to create a “security buffer” and a “humanitarian zone” for Syrian IDPs from other areas, as well as those residing in Turkish territory, the occupation has turned the two regions into what amounts to a patchwork of fiefdoms rife with human rights abuses. A report from the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria has confirmed that in the occupied areas, Turkish-backed SNA forces have committed an “onslaught of violations” against civilians including the “war crimes” of “hostage-taking, cruel treatment, torture, and rape.”¹

The Turkish-backed SNA militias that govern the regions and their leaders operate with impunity, using intimidation tactics to consolidate their control over the local populations, often for personal gain. The indigenous Kurdish, Christian and Yazidi populations are being systematically forced out and replaced with largely Arab and Turkmen settlers. Turkey’s social engineering project in the occupied areas has been well documented by the world’s leading human rights organizations including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the UNHCR.

This report aims to fill a critical gap in the documentation of human rights abuses occurring in the occupied zones, and to counteract a stage-managed narrative of the occupation strategically crafted by Turkey, and parroted by some of the world’s largest publications.²

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26237&LangID=E>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/16/world/middleeast/syria-turkey-erdogan-afrin.html>

METHODS

The report is based on RIC's own OSINT research as well as data, reports and testimonies from the ground in Afrin and the M4 Strip, collected by RIC and our partners in local media and human rights organizations. The media and human rights documentation landscape in the M4 Strip is rapidly growing, but for now most of our data is based on Afrin, where the longer entrenchment of the occupation means more data is available. Our graphs include numbers from Afrin that we put together by collecting and cross-referencing data from the Afrin Post, Syrians for Truth and Justice, Afrin Human Rights Organization, Missing Afrin Women project and other secondary and primary sources. For this report, only the "deaths" and "unlawful arrests/kidnapping" sections include numbers from the M4 Strip, provided to us in full by local rights watchdog Hevdesti. The testimonies section includes interviews that RIC conducted during a visit to Shehba, where about half of the IDPs from Afrin still live, scattered around the region's villages and IDP camps.

The report also draws on third party reports by the United Nations and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, as well as academic articles. Historical information is based on previous RIC reports, or on third-party sources where quoted.

We have also included maps of the occupied territories, with updated soft borders between the territories controlled by the patchwork of SNA militias, as well as key bases and facilities. We have cross-referenced our map with open source and satellite data. Maps were developed with the help of the Afrin Human Rights Organization and Hevdesti, as well as military sources and witness testimonies. RIC could not independently verify the territorial holdings of all factions, though some prison locations could be confirmed with the help of satellite data. Witness testimonies also helped to pinpoint militias to single villages and towns. Nonetheless, RIC makes no claim to completeness.

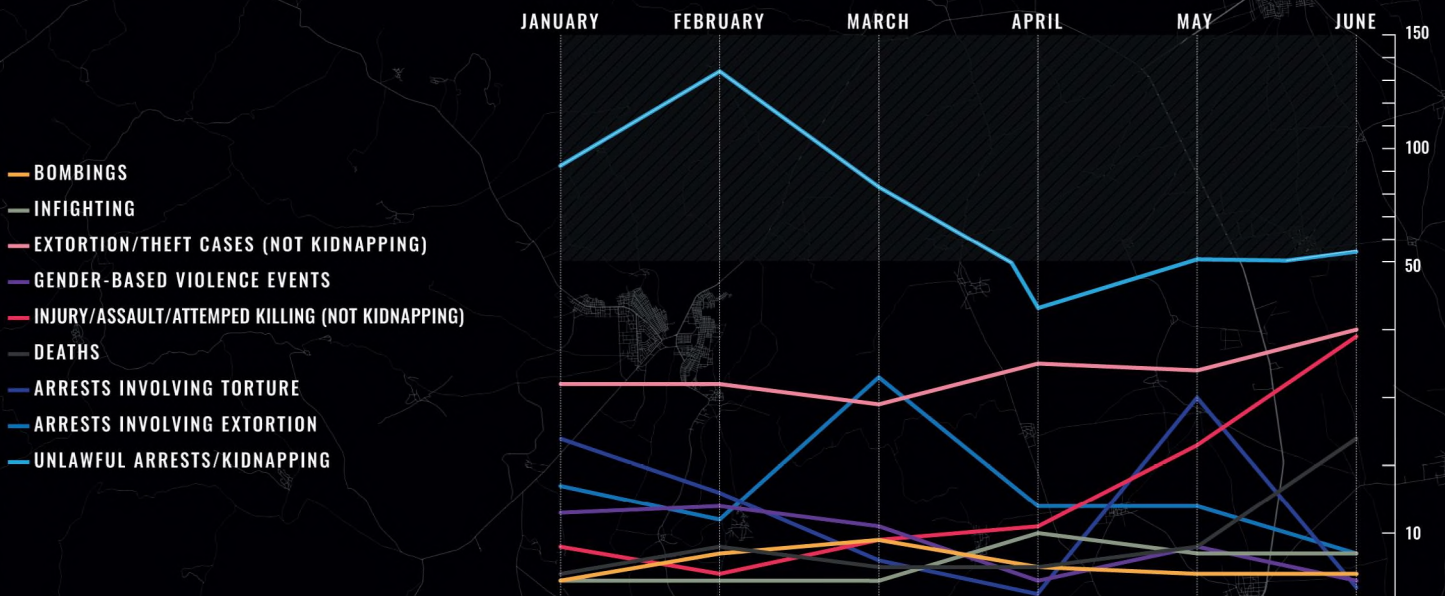
RIC's first quarterly report from the beginning of 2021 provided detailed background to the occupation, including briefings on each major SNA faction operating in the area. (In the summer there were some more significant shifts in the SNA's organization. We will include an updated organizational map in our next quarterly report.) Our Q1 report also includes a longer context section detailing the history of the occupation. The Q2 report will deal specifically with developments concerning human rights abuses in the occupied regions during the second quarter of this year, providing context and analysis where helpful. The first quarterly report can be accessed via the link [here](#).

All maps and graphics were produced by mapmaker and designer Eduardo Artica (@LCarabinier).

QUARTERLY REPORT

UNLAWFUL ARRESTS, TORTURE AND EXTORTION

In the second quarter of 2021, RIC recorded 150 arrests across Afrin and the M4 Strip. This is a substantial decrease from the first quarter total (312), though initial data from the third quarter indicates that arrests have returned to or even surpassed those from the first three months of the year. The dip may be partly due to pressure from Turkey on the SNA in March to decrease their arrests after the drastic spike in February (see Q1 report). So far, RIC was only able to verify that 32 of the 150 detainees from Q2 have been released from custody. As in the first quarter, the vast majority of those arrested were Kurdish and in almost all cases they were accused of collaboration with the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), the governing structure before the invasion.



These accusations are often arbitrarily applied for ‘crimes’ that would not have been considered as such under the AANES’ administration. This was particularly apparent in the case of Abdeen Sheikhmusa Musa (52) who was arrested in his home in the village of Baadina in early May on charges of participating in ‘guard shifts’, during the era of AANES control in the region. Under AANES control, communal participation in the security services was encouraged in order to allow communities to organize their own self-defense. The arbitrary and retroactive application of this charge means that a huge number of citizens who participated in such an organization – in many communities, virtually all of the adult population – will be perpetually vulnerable to arrest under SNA authority.

We have also seen a continued pattern of extortion by the arresting militias, who demand ransom from detainees and their families before release. Lawyers in the occupied areas often serve as little more than intermediaries to deliver these bribes. The almost universal charge of collaboration with the AANES suggests that the arrests are in many cases motivated simply by the extraction of ransom payments. Due to the limitations on the media landscape in the region, RIC was only able to independently confirm 38 cases of extortion this quarter. Given the testimonies we collected, and anecdotal evidence on the ground, the real number is likely much higher. Virtually all of those released from SNA-controlled prisons report an extortion attempt.

Arrests are also used as an intimidation tactic, to discourage those who have been victims of assault and extortion at the hands of the Turkish-backed militias from coming forward to seek justice. In April, Yahya Ali Hamkro (47) from the village of Karzileh, was kidnapped after demanding that the Ahrar al-Sham militia return his homes that they had expropriated. He died on April 21 in an Ahrar al-Sham militia prison from injuries he incurred while being severely tortured. This quarter, RIC was able to confirm that at least 6 people were tortured so severely that they died while in SNA custody.

While difficult to document reliably (though this quarter RIC was able to document 33 confirmed cases), anecdotal evidence from the ground suggests that torture is an almost universal part of detainment in the occupied areas. The torture is often brutal. One of RIC's detainee testimonies this quarter (featured at the end of the report in full) describes her experience thus:

“They beat us, electrocuted us, removed our fingernails and toenails with a pincer, beat us with electrical cables. They brought us to our pain threshold. For many of us, when they were beating us there was blood coming out from under our nails.”

For females, torture often includes sexual violence. RIC was able to confirm 14 cases of gender-based violence this quarter. In an interview gathered by RIC and also included in the testimonies section of this report, another former detainee describes witnessing the repeated rapes of a 16-year-old while he was detained. This incident took place prior to the reporting period, but is commensurate with other reports of the conditions in occupation jails:

“They raped her three times in front of us. The third time, there were ten people gathered around her. On this day, I would have liked the earth to open and swallow me rather than to see something like this. It was like a horror movie. It was like if a bear was devouring a little girl in the forest...They gathered around her. In the beginning they beat her several times. They ripped off her clothes, and one by one they raped her.”

In a particularly disturbing interview with a former detainee reported by Al-Monitor, Leila Mohammed Ahmed describes witnessing young women attempt suicide after being raped by members of the Sultan Murad militia:

“Some used belts to hang themselves, some pens or other sharp objects which they jabbed in their throats. Then there were the poor girls who just banged their heads against the wall until they collapsed.”³

Also disturbing is the increasingly common pattern of Syrian citizens being arrested in the occupied territories and then taken across the border and detained within Turkey. This is in violation of Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, and profoundly undermines Turkey’s official stance that they are “administering” the occupied areas for Syria, instead of annexing them. In May, the family of a man named Massoud Youssef Youssef learned that he had died as a result of severe torture after being held in a prison in the Turkish border town of Iskenderun. This is the first his family had heard of him since he was captured in Afrin in 2018, while serving as a member of the Asayish (AANES Internal Security, who were delivering local police services at the time of the invasion). Youssef’s brother told the Violations Documentation Center, an NGO based in northern Syria, that the Turkish authorities informed the family they had cut off one of Youssef’s legs while he was in custody, without providing any additional explanation. Youssef’s case is a part of a pattern in which families of the arrestees are left in legal and emotional limbo, unable to locate their loved ones, sometimes for years.

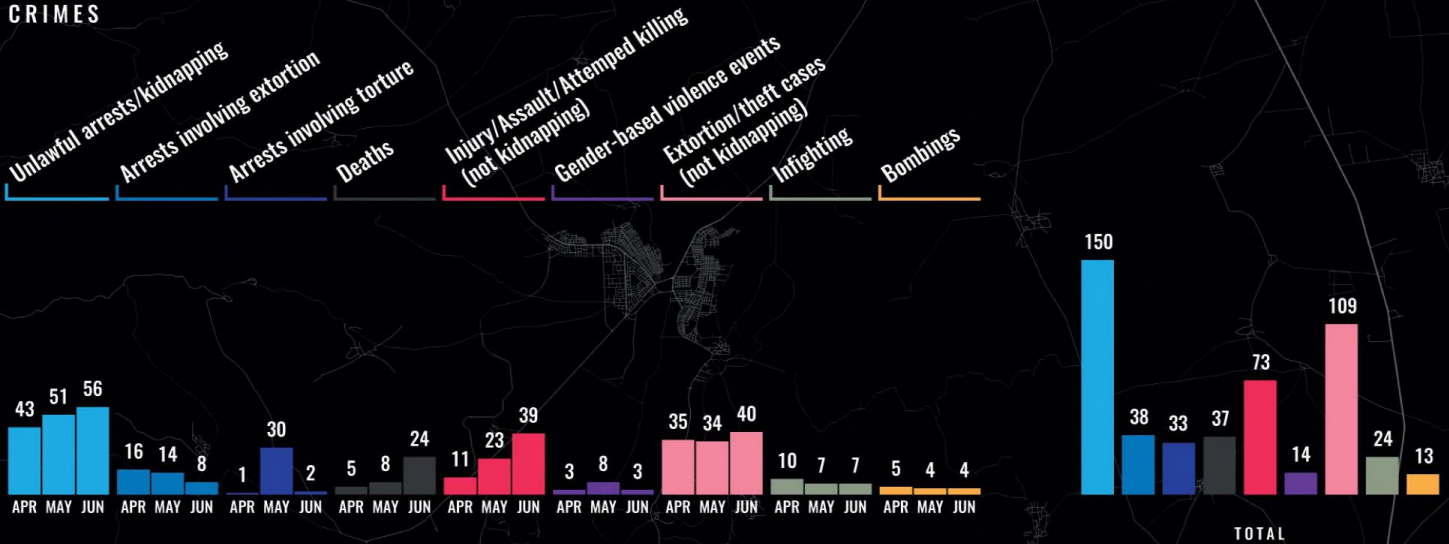
Turkey has also illegally invoked the logic of self-defense from Article 51 of the UN Charter to capture members of the US-backed Syrian Defense Forces (SDF) within Syria and transport them to Turkey to stand trial, where they can be sentenced to years in prison. In June, one of the SDF’s constituent forces, the Syriac Military Council, put out a statement condemning this behavior, and asking the international community to intervene.⁴

³ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/turkish-backed-rebels-leave-trail-abuse-and-criminality-syrias-afrin#ixzz78tVUPhI3>

⁴ <https://twitter.com/SyriacMFS/status/1409820718351716354>

In the spring, we also saw a pattern of arrests targeting citizens who have a history of working with the Turkish authorities, such as the case of Hozan Tubo (32). Tubo was working as a translator for the Turkish authorities at the time of his arrest, when the military police raided his house in the middle of the night and took him to Turkish intelligence headquarters in Afrin. RIC has been unable to confirm his release.⁵

CRIMES



⁵ <https://medyanews.net/prisoners-from-afrin-a-real-life-midnight-express-story-of-torture-and-lawlessness-in-turkey/>

CONTINUED DISPLACEMENT AND SOCIAL ENGINEERING

The occupations of Afrin and the M4 Strip resulted in the displacement of more than 300,000 and 200,000 people respectively. In Afrin, more than 400,000 settlers have been resettled in the homes of the more than 300,000 forcibly displaced indigenous residents.⁶ These settlers are often the very militants who force local Kurdish and Yazidi families out of their homes, only to subsequently move their own families in. Others are Syrian IDPs displaced from other parts of the country who are bussed into the occupied areas. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has stated that allowing ethnic Arabs to occupy houses of Kurds amounts to “an intentional attempt to permanently change the ethnic composition of the area.”⁷

Expropriated homes are often forcibly sold to settlers, in deals that preclude the possibility for the indigenous residents to return in the future. This is an on-going process. In two particularly striking cases from April, the Sultan Murad militia forced the sale of two houses of Kurdish residents for \$650 and \$500 respectively.⁸

EXPANDING THE SETTLEMENTS

The occupation authorities are also undertaking the widespread construction of new settlements designed to further shift the demographic balance. While President Erdoğan has pledged to build settlements across the occupied zones, construction has only begun in earnest in Afrin, and so the present report focuses on the issue there.

In spring 2021, the pace of construction on new settlements increased drastically due to support from the Turkish-backed local authorities and funding from organizations and associations affiliated with the Syrian diaspora, the global Muslim Brotherhood, the governments of Qatar and Kuwait, and Turkish and international NGOs.

⁶ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2021/05/26/499944/northern-syria-security-dynamics-refugee-crisis/>

⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26258>

⁸ http://afrinpost.net/ar/2021/05/%d8%a8%d8%a7%d9%86%d9%88%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%85%d8%a7_%d8%a3%d8%a8%d8%b1%d9%8a%d9%84_2021-%d8%a7%d8%b3%d8%aa%d8%b4%d9%87%d8%a7%d8%af-%d9%85%d9%88%d8%a7%d8%b7%d9%86-%d8%aa%d8%ad%d8%aa-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa/

In the Sherawa district of Afrin, a 380-building housing development called 'Kuwait al-Rahma' was built by Sham al-Khair, a charitable association registered in Turkey. The project was built with the support of the Turkish-backed local Afrin City Council,⁹ and the Kuwaiti government. Promotional material for their construction is easily available on the organization's website.¹⁰

Another organization, Al Ihsan Relief and Development, has built a project with 247 housing units that each include a 60m² garden, at the base of Mount Qazqli near the village of Hajj Hasna.¹¹ Al Ihsan is a Turkey-based relief organization that is a part of the Syrian Forum, a coordinating body of NGOs working on humanitarian relief in Syria. Al Ihsan counts UNICEF, Save the Children, IRC, the UN, IOM, King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre, and many more international groups from Turkey and the Middle East among its partners.¹² Notably, Al Ihsan does not publish materials about the settlement projects around Afrin among its promotional materials on its website.¹³

This spring also saw a pattern of Palestinians residents in Syria being settled in the occupied territories. In May, Shah Deher, a traditionally Yazidi village whose inhabitants were forcibly displaced by the Turkish occupation in March 2018, saw the construction of additional housing units, a mosque and a *madrassa*. Palestinian refugees in Syria were then brought in to settle the development, renamed the Basma Village.¹⁴



Deputy head of the Afrin City Council, Mohamed Sheikh Rasheed walks with Ahmed Hussein, head of the Afrin Health Department and others at the construction site of Kuwait al-Rahma on April 17, 2021. Photo from Afrin Local Council.



The inauguration ceremony of Kuwait al-Rahma village in August 2021. The Emir of Kuwait, Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, is pictured prominently in the background banner.

⁹ <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/19042021>

¹⁰ <http://shamalkher.org/project/%d8%a5%d9%81%d8%aa%d8%aa%d8%a7%d8%ad-%d9%82%d8%b1%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d9%83%d9%88%d9%8a%d8%aa-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b1%d8%ad%d9%85%d8%a9-%d8%b1%d9%8a%d9%81-%d8%ad%d9%84%d8%a8-%d8%b9%d9%81%d8%b1%d9%8a%d9%86>

¹¹ http://afrinpost.net/ar/2021/05/%d8%a8%d8%a7%d9%86%d9%88%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%85%d8%a7_%d8%a3%d8%a8%d8%b1%d9%8a%d9%84_2021-%d8%a7%d8%b3%d8%aa%d8%b4%d9%87%d8%a7%d8%af-%d9%85%d9%88%d8%a7%d8%b7%d9%86-%d8%aa%d8%ad%d8%aa-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa/

¹² https://www.ihsanrd.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Profile_v01_2020.pdf

¹³ ihsanrd.org/nfi-shelter/

¹⁴ <https://hawarnews.com/en/haber/supported-by-qatari-and-kuwaiti-turkish-occupation-builds-settlement-for-palestinians-in-an-afrin-yazidi-village-h24697.html>

Construction of this and other settlements in the region have received funding from the Palestinian Living in Dignity Organization, the Muslim Brotherhood-linked Turkish White Hands charitable association and the Qatari Red Crescent, the Kuwaiti government, as well as support from the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs, a ministry that directly reports to the Turkish presidency.¹⁵ Turkey is particularly keen to be seen as a friend of Palestinians, using apparent support for one minority to mask policies of assimilation or expulsion conducted against other minorities in the same region.

Additionally, enlisting international charitable support for building occupation settlements helps provide humanitarian cover and prevent international pushback against the settlements. While framed as purely humanitarian projects to support the Syrian population, in the context of the forcible population change outlined above, these projects actively facilitate illegal population transfer, and serve Turkey's project of demographic change.



Construction of the Basma village with White Hands workers and the flags of Turkey and Kuwait in the background.

It is worth nothing that while the construction of these settlements receives international funding with ease, the same cannot be said for the many IDP camps scattered around NES that are housing those the occupation has displaced. These camps struggle to receive international support, due in part to the difficulty of getting aid into non-recognized AANES territory. They are left to function only with AANES resources and the help of smaller international NGOs and occasional International Coalition support.

¹⁵ <https://hawarnews.com/en/haber/from-building-mosques-to-settlement-complexes-demographic-change-continues-in-afrin-h25287.html>

Facing criticism from international rights monitors including the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), Turkey has attempted to address accusations that it has aided the cultural erasure of the indigenous Yazidi population in its occupied territories, deploying various soft-power and propaganda strategies to this end. In April, Turkish authorities sent a delegation to a Yazidi village for 'Red Wednesday', the Yazidi New Year celebration. In addition, Turkish intelligence called for a meeting between Yazidi representatives of a village in the Afrin countryside and settlers from East Ghouta. The meeting resulted in the settlers receiving carte blanche permission to reside on and begin construction on village land, including of a mosque. It was later revealed by a local Yazidi human rights outfit, the Ezdina Foundation, that the Yazidi representatives at the meeting had been imposters. No actual Yazidi villagers were present in the meeting. Despite this well-publicized revelation, the construction permissions have not been rescinded.¹⁶

Additionally, the Turkish authorities have also supported the construction of a new Chechen association called the "Caucasian Charitable Association" in Sere Kaniye, which opened its doors in June.¹⁷ The opening ceremony was attended by leaders from the militia factions present in the city, Sultan Murad and Hamza Division. That the building openly flies the flag of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, a Russian separatist movement, illustrates Turkey's comfort stoking hostilities with Russia in the region.



Opening ceremony of the Caucasian Charitable Association in Sere Kaniye, on June 25, 2021. The Ichkeria Flag hangs in the middle.

¹⁶ <https://www.ezdina.com/2021/07/Reportag-Ezidi400.html?m=1>

¹⁷ <https://hawarnews.com/en/haber/turkish-occupation-brings-in-extremist-chechen-association-to-occupied-serkaniy-h25413.html>

Notably, Sere Kaniye has been experiencing widespread unemployment and inadequate provision of basic services, prompting civilians to protest throughout the spring. One protest culminated in a firefight between Hamza Division militants and the military police, after each side accused the other of suppressing the demonstration.¹⁸ An interview with an Arab woman who escaped Tel Abyad by walking 44 km to Ain Issa, describes similar unrest and poor provision of services in Tel Abyad.¹⁹

On the other hand, Turkey has tried to ensure that Afrin, unlike many other places in Syria under control of the Government of Syria and the AANES, receives consistent electricity and running water. The opening of the Kilis Yukarı Afrin Dam in June, as a part of the broader Southeastern Anatolia Project within Turkey, will help serve these ends.²⁰ By superficially improving quality of life in Afrin, and building more permanent settlements, Turkey can lay claim to improving the lives of residents, as well as help encourage some of the 3.5 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey to move into the occupied areas, furthering the demographic shift. At the same time and in stark contrast, Turkey is illegally restricting water flow into the Euphrates River and severing water flow from the Alouk water station (in occupied Sere Kaniye) into AANES-controlled territories. These actions threaten the water supply for millions of Syrians living in North and East Syria outside the occupied areas, many of whom were displaced by the Turkish invasions to begin with.

INCREASINGLY HARSH IMPOSITION OF ISLAMIC LAW

The Turkish-backed Syrian Interim Government has continued a trend of imposing new and oppressive Islamic laws and cultural norms across the occupied areas. During Ramadan, written notices were sent to police and militia departments, as well as checkpoints, empowering local police and militia members to arrest and punish anyone who broke the traditional fast in public.²¹

Female residents of the occupied territories feel particular pressure to conform to stricter Islamic norms. This spring a 14-year-old girl from Sheikh al-Hadid, south of Afrin, was arrested by members of the Suleiman Shah Division for not wearing the veil. Upon her release she claimed that Muhammed al-Jassim (AKA 'Abu Amsha'), the notorious leader of the division, was personally present during her detention and had slapped her in the face multiple times while threatening to shave her head with an electric razor.²² Before the invasion, Afrin was considered among the most secular regions of the country: now, it is estimated that 90% of women don the

¹⁸ <https://npasyria.com/en/59412/>

¹⁹ <https://hawarnews.com/kr/haber/yn-ku-nasnameyn-wan-n-tirk-tunebe-nikarin-ji-mal-der-kevin-h52942.html>

²⁰ <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/English/haberler/detay/the-global-crisis-caused-by-the-pandemic-has-laid-bare-the-great-opportunities-before-turkey>

²¹ https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=501922731191287&id=114977619885802

²² https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=534458277937732&id=114977619885802

²³ <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/11/27/who-are-turkeys-proxy-fighters-in-syria/>

veil.²³ According to the Violations Documentation Center in Northern Syria, the rates of underage marriage in Afrin have skyrocketed since the occupation. When the region was under the control of the AANES, child marriage was illegal. Now, 40% of marriages in the region are thought to include underage girls.²⁴

Christian communities in the M4 Strip also find themselves reliving patterns from the war with ISIS. Assyrian and Syriac communities in the countryside around Tel Tamr, on the front lines of the M4 Strip occupation, face daily shelling from the Turkish army and occupying militias. Many have abandoned their homes voluntarily to escape the incessant violence.

ECOLOGICAL DEVASTATION

Before the occupation Afrin was known as a lush and green oasis, as compared to the comparatively barren land in much of the rest of northern Syria. The occupation is slowly destroying this natural heritage; 90% of 33,000ha of forests have been destroyed since 2018 in Afrin, and the destruction is continuing unabated.²⁵



Fires blaze through Afrin's countryside in April

²⁴ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/how-syrias-afrin-became-hell-for-kurds/>

²⁵ https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=533560141360879&id=11497761988580

Photographic evidence from the occupied areas during the second quarter showed once-forested mountains and fields burning, with massive plumes of smoke rising into the air after they were set on fire by the occupying militias. In a particularly egregious incident this quarter, militants from the Suleiman Shah Division intentionally burned a 7km stretch of old coniferous forest, and 30 hectares of fruit tree orchards, in order to sell the resulting charcoal.²⁶

Those trees that aren't destroyed by the occupying militias are also frequently expropriated and exploited. In May, members of the Samarkand Militia seized 15,000 olive trees from villagers in Karf Safra without compensation.²⁷⁻²⁸ RIC estimates that in total 16,785 trees were seized this quarter, alongside many more destroyed in fires.

EXPLOITATION AND ORGANIZED CRIME

Throughout the areas under their control, the occupying militias have become middle-men in Afrin's lucrative and historically-significant olive industry (Afrin is known as Syria's "Holy City of Olives"). They regularly extract bribes from local farmers before allowing them to harvest their own olive and grape-vine fields. RIC was able to confirm cases in which the Sultan Murad and Samarkand militias demanded bribes of 600-800 SYP before allowing farmers onto their own fields at the height of the harvest season in May. When farmers want to export their olives and other produce, they are charged additional fees or forced to sell their produce to the militias at desperately low prices.

Turkey's Agricultural Credit Cooperative then buys the olives from the militias through intermediaries, and provides the produce to Turkish producers such as Jobri Food, that in turn provides it to distributors such as Cibal Afrin, MIR Packing Import and Export and Afrin Farms.²⁹⁻³⁰ As Turkish oil exporter Ali Nedim Gureli told German broadcaster Deutsche Welle: "Now the majority of Afrin's estimated [annual production of] 30,000 tons of olive oil comes to Turkey. Afrin's olive oil has become Turkish produce."³¹ From there, this oil reaches shelves in Europe and the United States, in contradiction of international law around war-time economic exploitation and the exploitation of occupied territories.³²

²⁶ https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=534199634630263&id=11497761988580

²⁷⁻²⁸ <http://afrinpost.net/ar/2021/06/%d8%a8%d8%a7%d9%86%d9%88%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%85%d8%a7-%d9%85%d8%a7%d9%8a%d9%88-%d8%a3%d9%8a%d8%a7%d8%b1-2021-%d8%aa%d9%88%d8%ab%d9%8a%d9%82-%d8%aa%d9%88%d8%ab%d9%8a%d9%82-%d8%a7%d8%b3%d8%aa%d8%b4%d9%87/>

²⁹ RIC independent research
³⁰ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/turkish-backed-rebels-leave-trail-abuse-and-criminality-syrias-afrin#ixzz78flryyO2>

³¹ <https://www.dw.com/tr/afrin-zeytinya%C4%9F%C4%B1-t%C3%BCrk-mal%C4%B1-oldu/a-48036028>

³² <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-olive-oil-in-your-local-store-may-be-funding-syrian-warlords>

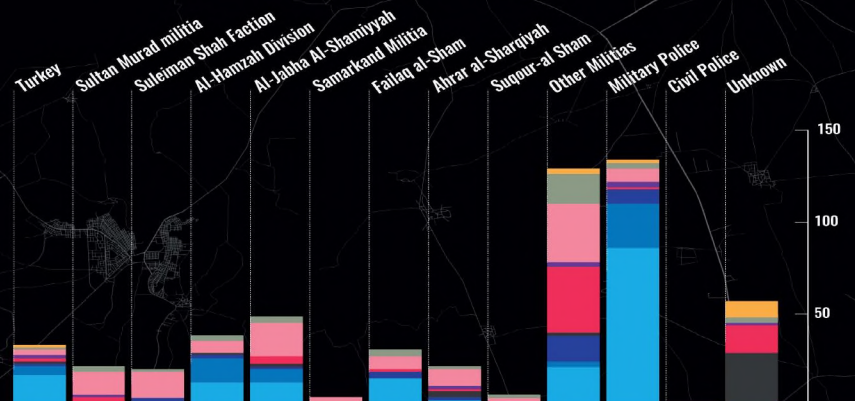
It is also an open secret that the occupying militias enrich themselves by participating in the drug trade. In May, over 900KG of Captagon - more than 6.2 million pills – were seized by customs officials at the Iskanderdun port in the southern Turkish Hatay province. It is widely believed that these drugs were the illicit property of Suleiman Shah, bound for the United Arab Emirates. The aforementioned leader of Suleiman Shah, ‘Abu Amsa’, is notorious his involvement in criminal ventures.^{33,34}

Business owners in the occupied regions also live under the threat of daily exploitation by the occupying militias. Militia members make the rounds of the areas under their control, demanding ‘taxes’ at will. In June, the Hamza Division militia directed mayors in the areas under its control to conduct a census of all private property, for the purposes of extracting extrajudicial taxes in a more orderly way, and directly expropriating some of the listed property.³⁵ Between the occupying militias, RIC documented 109 cases of expropriation in the second quarter alone, amounting to a new case almost every day.

Precious little in the occupied areas is safe from expropriation. The Afrin Human Rights Organization estimates that at this point 60% of all private property in the occupied regions has been seized or destroyed by militants, including houses, stores, and agricultural lands.³⁶

FACTIONS

- BOMBINGS
- INFIGHTING
- EXTORTION/THEFT CASES (NOT KIDNAPPING)
- GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE EVENTS
- INJURY/ASSAULT/ATTEMPTED KILLING (NOT KIDNAPPING)
- DEATHS
- ARRESTS INVOLVING TORTURE
- ARRESTS INVOLVING EXTORTION
- UNLAWFUL ARRESTS/KIDNAPPING

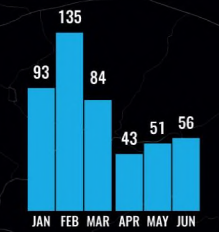


³³ <http://afrinpost.net/ar/2021/05/%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%a7%d9%86-%d9%85%d9%8a%d9%84-%d9%8a%d8%b4%d9%8a%d8%a7-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b9%d9%85%d8%b4%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d8%a8%d8%ae%d8%b5%d9%88%d8%b5-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b9%d9%85%d8%af%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b1/>

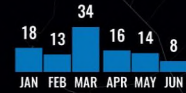
³⁴ https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=529285721788321&id=114977619885802

³⁵ <http://afrinpost.net/ar/2021/07/%d8%a8%d8%a7%d9%86%d9%88%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%85%d8%a7-%d9%8a%d9%88%d9%86%d9%8a%d9%88-%d8%ad%d8%b2%d9%8a%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%862021-%d8%aa%d9%88%d8%ab%d9%8a%d9%82-%d8%a7%d8%b3%d8%aa%d8%b4%d9%87%d8%a7%d8%af-%d8%aa%d9%88%d8%ab%d9%8a%d9%82-%d8%a7%d8%b3%d8%aa%d8%b4%d9%87%d8%a7%d8%af/>

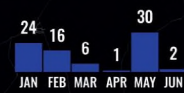
³⁶ https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=529285721788321&id=114977619885802



Unlawful arrests/kidnapping



Arrests involving extortion



Arrests involving torture



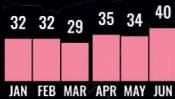
Deaths



Injury/Assault/Attempted killing (not kidnapping)



Gender-based violence events



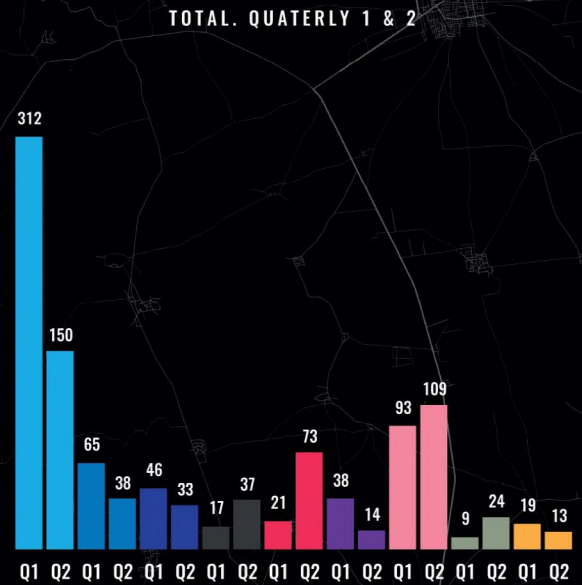
Extortion/theft cases (not kidnapping)



Infighting



Bombings



TOTAL. QUATERLY 1 & 2

INFIGHTING

SNA militias in the occupied regions also engage in perpetual infighting. RIC documented 24 cases of infighting this quarter, a steep increase from the 9 documented in Q1. This infighting often turns lethal for members of the militia groups, as well as civilians caught in the crossfire.

While Turkey often steps in as a mediator in the larger disputes, much of the infighting is too petty to warrant their intervention, and the factions are left to duke it out among themselves. For Turkey, this also ensures that no one SNA militia becomes too powerful.

In some cases, however, Turkish officials are directly involved. In April, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitored fierce infighting between Faylaq Al-Sham militiamen and Turkish intelligence, who settled a dispute over expropriated property and a military headquarters with automatic weapons and hand grenades.³⁷

³⁷ https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=507002174016676&id=114977619885802

Infighting also breaks out within groups. For example, it is well known that many of the SNA factions are employed by Turkey to travel by the thousands to Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh and other theaters of war as mercenaries, with the promise of far higher wages than they would receive in Syria. When they return to the occupied regions, and are not paid as they had been promised by either their Turkish handlers or SNA leaders, issues arise. In April, members of Suleiman Shah staged a public protest after not receiving their wages for fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh. In a video from the protest, a spokesman from the group claims that Abu Amsha stole their salaries, and injured fighters have no recourse or support, while motioning to a friend of his with a broken leg and crutches.³⁸

It is important to note that the SNA militias have also been found to recruit minors into their ranks. The State Department noted in its 2021 Trafficking in Persons report released on July 1, that Turkey was providing “tangible support” to the Sultan Murad division, which deployed child soldiers in their Libya and Syria operations.³⁹ This report marked the first time that Turkey, and the first time that any NATO ally, was put on the US State Department’s list of states complicit in child military recruitment, called the Child Soldiers Prevention Act List. Under the Child Soldiers Prevention Act, passed in 2008, countries on the list are prohibited from receiving direct military support in the form of military assistance and arms sale from the United States, unless the country receives a presidential waiver.⁴⁰⁻⁴¹ (On October 8, Turkey received this waiver.⁴²)

SNA militias have also been implicated in clan-based blood feuds. In May, Mohammed Al-Hussein Al-Shartoot was found with his neck slashed, reportedly by Abdo Othman, a member of the Failaq al-Sham militia. Local activists accused the rival local Dawla clan of collaborating with Failaq al-Sham to orchestrate the murder, as a part of their blood feud with the Shartoot clan.

³⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=124977412937423>

³⁹ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/07/us-adds-turkey-list-countries-using-child-soldiers#ix-zz78fqYjcSC>

⁴¹ <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/IF10901.pdf>

⁴² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/10/08/memorandum-for-the-secretary-of-state-on-presidential-determination-and-certification-with-respect-to-the-child-soldiers-prevention-act-of-2008/>

ISIS IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORY

Additionally, many of the occupying militias count ex-ISIS members among their ranks. RIC has confirmed the presence of over 80 former ISIS members fighting as part of Turkish-backed militias in the zones of Turkish occupation.⁴³⁻⁴⁴ Their control of large swathes of Syrian territory, has proved crucial for ISIS' continued operations in the Northeast.

SDF spokesman Aram Hanna has confirmed that captured ISIS operatives have admitted to "[using] the occupied areas to pass explosives." He also noted: "the occupied areas have become a suitable environment for the activity of mercenaries and terrorists to operate without accountability."⁴⁵ As we noted in our Q1 report, ISIS sleeper cells are also able to resettle ISIS women smuggled out of Al-Hol camp in occupied Sere Kaniye, where militiamen have been encouraged to marry them by their superiors.

At the same time, RIC interviewed a former detainee of a detention facility in Afrin run by the Turkish-controlled Military Police, who affirmed that he was held with German, French, Russian and Azerbaijani-speaking individuals believed to be former members of ISIS. Another interview RIC conducted with a former detainee indicated the presence of female ISIS affiliates in detention as well. The presence of ISIS members in these detention facilities suggests that Turkey balances this issue carefully, cooperating with ISIS members when it serves their interests and cracking down when it does not.

⁴³ <https://rojainformationcenter.com/2020/10/database-former-isis-members-now-part-of-turkish-backed-forces-in-sere-kaniye-and-tel-abyad/>

⁴⁴ <https://rojainformationcenter.com/2019/08/database-over-40-former-isis-members-now-part-of-turkish-backed-forces/>

⁴⁵ <https://hawarnews.com/en/haber/sdfs-spox-we-not-to-abandon-liberation-of-occupied-territories-h27087.html>

BOMBING AND SHELLING

Our data for Q2 shows a significant spike in deaths. Twenty-two of these deaths came from one concentrated period of shelling, that included a lethal 'double tap' strike on Afrin's Shifaa Hospital. The shelling received worldwide media attention due to the civilian death toll, including the death of two women who were in the process of giving birth in the maternity ward, and their newborns. Unsurprisingly, no group came forward to claim the attack. In an important update this October, however, human rights monitor Syrian for Truth and Justice (STJ) published an exhaustive investigation into the incident based on OSINT research plus eyewitness testimony from paramedics, SNA-linked military sources, and civilians who witnessed the attack. They compiled what they believe to be compelling, though not definitive, "evidence that Russian and Syrian government forces were responsible" for the lethal attack – likely carried out by a pro-regime militia, with Russian oversight. The evidence includes the type of rockets used, the origins of the attack, the attack style, the timing of the attack among other details.⁴⁶

Apart from this well publicized attack on a hospital, the second quarter brought a slight decrease in bombings in the occupied areas (13 compared to 19 in Q1). Most of the bombings in the category recorded here came from unknown sources. This category only includes explosions that threatened the lives of civilians, such as VBIEDs detonated in a city center, or shelling targeting civilian buildings, not the far higher rate of attacks that were expressly launched against SNA factions or bases. In this latter category are a number of bombings not represented on our chart, claimed by the Afrin Liberation Forces (AFL), a local resistance group, against the SNA militia bases and headquarters. While the AFL has no official ties to the SDF, it is believed to operate out of SDF controlled territory adjacent to the occupied zone. (Inter-SNA attacks were counted as incidents of infighting).

⁴⁶ <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-an-investigation-on-the-attack-on-afrins-al-shifaa-hospital/>

CONCLUSION

This quarter saw a rise in many of the categories of crime documented in this report, including expropriations, injuries and assaults, cases of infighting and deaths. Many of the deaths resulted from a single shelling campaign against the Afrin Shi-faa Hospital, which compelling evidence compiled by a local human rights monitor suggests was carried out by the Syrian Government with Russian oversight. Incidents of expropriation also accelerated this quarter. This included the theft and destruction of at least 16,785 privately-owned fruit bearing trees in Afrin during the May harvest, and the intentional arson of 7 km of coniferous forest by militants in the Suleiman Shah division in order to sell the resulting charcoal. This quarter also saw the increasingly harsh application of Islamic law by the military police and the occupying militias in the occupied territories, including punishment for breaking the Ramadan fast in public, and the arrest and abuse of a 14-year-old girl for not wearing a veil. The second quarter of the year also saw accelerated construction of new settlements in the occupied Afrin region, some of which were built specifically to house Palestinians living in Syria.

Other categories of crime documented in the report saw a decrease, especially arrests. However as stated above, initial data suggests the numbers of arrests rose again during the summer. In Q2, RIC documented 150 arrests across the three months. Almost all of the detainees were Kurdish, and arrested under accusations of 'working with the AANES'. In 38 of these 150 arrests, RIC was able to confirm torture. As stated in the report, at least six detainees were tortured so severely that they died while in detention. RIC also documented 14 gender-based violence events.

The data from the quarter make clear that the occupying militias continue to ignore basic human rights in the occupied areas. The anecdotes included in the written section of this report are far from exhaustive- testimonies of brutal torture and widespread theft of property continue to pour out of both Afrin and the M4 Strip. Meanwhile hundreds of thousands of the indigenous residents of these regions remain displaced around Syria- and are being replaced in their homeland by settlers from other regions as a part of Turkey's social engineering campaign.

TESTIMONIES

MAHMUD

My name is Mahmud, I am 18 years old. At the time this story took place, I was 17 years old. I am a Kurd from Afrin, from the village of Til Rinde. After the Turkish invasion of Afrin, my family and I fled to Shehba. After some time, my family's economic situation became really bad. My mother wanted me to go to Turkey, where my sister was staying, to work and be able to help my family. So I crossed illegally to Afrin. After one month in Afrin [waiting to go to Turkey] I was arrested on the Azadi Roundabout. They dragged me by my feet from the car for about 500 meters, to a building that had been called 'The Trade School' [Dibistana Tujara] when the YPG was in charge, but is now a center of the Military Police. It is on Velat Street, next to Afrin Hospital. The mercenaries controlling it were the Jabhat al-Shamiya, linked to the Military Police. When we got to the station, they gathered around me and beat me with the butts of their weapons. After this, there were different kinds of torture, like one in which they chained me and hung me from the ceiling. Or they made me lie down on the ground, with my feet up, and beat my feet with a hose, 100, 150, sometimes 160, 170 time. They beat your feet until you lay like a dead body on the floor.

They tortured me in other ways as well. For twelve days they handcuffed me. You can still see traces of the handcuffs on my wrists, and my hands are still shaking because of it. They hung me from the ceiling. Like on the cross. You can see scars from when they put out more than twelve cigarettes on my arm. They broke my legs. Everyday they gave us one, two or three pieces of bread for all 38 of us in the cell. Some days there was no food. The water that they gave us was dirty; there was earth and grass in it. In the cell I stayed in, they cut our hair every week or two, and left it on the floor. It was really dirty, there was a lot of lice. Food was scarce, water was scarce, and there was torture and beatings at all times.

In our cell, there were also ISIS-affiliated people. Azerbaijanis, Russians: everyone was from somewhere else. For example, there was one German person, one French.

There were also regime soldiers, also some people that had been convicted for stealing. Also some that had worked briefly for the AANES, or had joined a [pro-AANES] demonstration, and for this they have stayed in jail for months, nine months, six months, three months, and have been beaten, until someone pays their ransom.

The same torture they were employing on us they were also employing on women, but even more so. For example, there was a 16-year-old girl from Afrin, Shera district. They raped her three times in front of us. The third time, there were ten people gathered around her. On this day, I would have liked the earth to open and swallow me rather than to see something like this. It was like a horror movie. It was like if a bear was devouring a little girl in the forest. The girl was only 16. They gathered around her. In the beginning they beat her several times. They ripped off her clothes, and one by one they raped her.

One day, a Turkish officer came and asked us, "What is the situation here, is it good? How are the mercenaries behaving with the Kurds?" Nobody dared to speak. I thought, 'I will speak, even if I am killed. I cannot stay silent, it is better to speak and be beaten'.

I said: "There is no food, we are constantly tortured for no reason, sometimes there is only one piece of bread for 38 people. There isn't enough water. We go to the toilet only once a day or every two days."

As soon as I finished, the Turkish officer said, "Place him in isolation." All of the orders comes from Turkish officers: 'Torture this one', 'Beat up this one', all of this comes from them. The mercenaries don't do it by themselves, they take orders.

The isolation cell was smaller than a chicken cage. You couldn't move in it. It was only 50 centimeters or something like that. Right before they put me in the cage, an officer lifted my head and hit me with his Glock. He broke two of my teeth. They are still broken now. After that, I stayed in isolation for 108 days.

Then, I was brought to the children's jail, because I was 17 years old. I stayed there 58 days. So, in total, I was in jail for nine months, until I was released. In order to get me released my parents paid a total of 4000USD to the Military Police and to a lawyer. After being released, with the help of a smuggler I went back to Shehba, to my parents.

“AMARA KIBARE”

My name is Amara [name changed to protect interviewee’s identity], from Chiri village. I am a Yazidi, from Shengal. My story is a little bit difficult but I will speak to you. I was traveling to Aleppo in a car with eight other women, including my daughter, and we were arrested on the road to Azaz. We were stopped and arrested by women aligned with Sultan Murad in the Free Syrian Army [ie. the Syrian National Army]. If it had been men arresting us, they would have been more brutal, and beheaded us, but the women arrested us and took us to jail in Azaz.

We stayed in jail in a cave in Azaz for 24 days, and the guards there tortured us everyday. There were 5 other women there who had been arrested for prostitution and connections to ISIS. So in total we were 14 Kurds and Arabs, and they were brutal to us. They beat us, electrocuted us, removed our fingernails and toenails with a pincer, beat us with electrical cables. They brought us to our pain threshold. For many of us, when they were beating us there was blood coming out from under our nails. They humiliated us, handcuffing us and making us wear black clothes.

I was arrested two days before Ramadan. When Ramadan started one of the guards said: “It’s Ramadan, you have to fast.” I answered to him that I don’t fast.

When he asked why, I told him: “Because I am a Yazidi and I have my own fasting days.” From them on, they tortured me even more.

One day, a mercenary came and told me I should be beheaded. I said: “I didn’t do anything to be beheaded.”

He said: “Shut up. You are Yazidi.”

I said: “Yes, I am Yazidi, from Shengal.”

When you say something like this, they bring you to the electricity wheel. They put you on it and they electrify you.

There is another smaller wheel. No matter how big you are, they force you inside the wheel, your head and everything, and close you in. Then it starts turning, and with an electric stick they beat you from the outside until you bleed.

While we were there, the food was disgusting, it had stones in it. We were not getting enough to eat. We had to use our money to buy food. Once a week we gathered our money and gave it to the guard to bring us food. I spent about 100,000 SYP (~200 USD) on food.

I also fell ill but they didn't get my medicine. I have diabetes, and heart problems, and I was continuously asking them for medicine but they wouldn't give it. One day I managed to ask the wife of a soldier if she could help me get some medicine, so that I could sleep, have some relief. She managed to get the medicine to me, and I hid it. But even so, the guards seized both of us, and beat us both mercilessly on our feet and intimate parts.

All of the women experienced sexual torture. One cannot speak about it. Every time the mercenaries had nothing to do, they tortured us. Women of all ages, 20, 25, 35, 40.

Eventually, I got out of the prison in Azaz and was moved to Ma'ra. This was slightly better because then I managed to get a lawyer, who helped me get my food and my medicine. But there was still torture. There is torture in all the jails. In this jail there were 24 of us. There were some beds, but most of us were sleeping on the floor.

Eventually, after four months, my children paid over 1,000,000 SYP (~2000 USD) to a lawyer who gave it to the guards to have me released, and they finally let me out.

Why did they arrest us? Because we are Kurds. Because we are living on our land and they don't like us. That is all.

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